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ABSTRACT

Although the media has attended to the subject of juvenile homicide, the professional literature on the subject is sparse. To identify a model for standardized data collection for juveniles who murder, 12 juveniles charged with first degree murder were administered a series of tests during psychological interviews. Data were collected on social class, home environment, school, previous delinquencies, mental illness, substance abuse, personality characteristics, and intelligence. The results showed that 9 of the 12 subjects had dropped out of school and 11 were from divorced parents. Four had previous arrests and one was heavily involved with substance abuse, although most had occasionally tried alcohol or marijuana. They were not all of the same racial background, no unusual evidence for violence and chaos in the homes existed, they were not all poor, and over half had IQs exceeding 100. There was no history of mental illness, less than half had previous arrests, and only one gave indications of psychopathy. While none of the information in the profiles of the 12 juvenile criminals is generalizable, these data can provide judges with important background information on which to base sentencing decisions. Future research should examine the usefulness of the information to the judges. (BL)

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CHILDREN WHO KILL

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CHILDREN WHO KILL

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The tragic circumstance of juveniles who murder raises at least two questions for psychologists: What information can she or he provide attorneys and the courts to aid in the disposition of those cases? And, what reliable data can be made available across studies and across courts toward a body of knowledge about the phenomena?

The adjudication process for juvenile homicide varies widely from state to state, and even within courts in a given state. That fact will require some accommodation for a given court, but does not preclude the utility of developing criteria of universal relevance across courts. A core of common measures would assure that each court had available specific relevant information, but would also contribute to our knowledge by making cross study and cross court comparisons as well.

The media has increasingly attended the subject of children who kill (e.g. Time, December 16, 1981; Rolling Stone, May 26, 1983), but professional literature on the subject is sparse. That fact becomes quickly apparent to any psychologist who begins work with a public defender or other officers in the court system.

This paper was presented by the author at the Annual Meetings of the American Psychological Association, Division of Psychology and the Law, on August 25, 1984, in Toronto.

In 1977, Sorrell interviewed 31 juveniles charged with murder in Alameda County California and concluded that none were psychotic at the time of the crime. He concluded that his sample were all from poor communities where infant mortality rates were high; all were from families characterized as violent or chaotic; all were from one parent homes where the remaining parent was either depressed, alcoholic, or emotionally disturbed, and all are profoundly influenced by the media and by peers.

Heide (1983) interviewed 30 juvenile males all of whom had been convicted of first or second degree or attempted murder and had served 15 months or less of their sentence. She concluded, "children who kill are a special type of violent youth", a new breed, detached from empathy or remorse for their victims, and who typically deny strong feelings or emotional involvement about their crime.

Neither of these pioneering studies was directed at providing a model for information which would be useful to the courts, and neither included measures of great use in comparing results across studies. The data provided below provides a first approximation for standardized data collection which would satisfy both goals.

METHOD

Subjects were 12 juveniles charged with first degree murder and appointed to the Office of the Public Defender for the Sixth Judicial Circuit of Florida over an 18 month period from January 1, 1983 to July 1, 1984. That district includes a population of

slightly less than 1 million people whose average age is older but includes a reasonably normal distribution of social class. Following Grand Jury Indictment all subjects were adjudicated under the adult system with the exception of one seven and one eight year old whom the Grand Jury recommended to remain in the juvenile system. Six subjects were 17 years old at the time of the crime, 2 were 16, 2 were 15, one was 8, and one was 7. Four of the 12 subjects were females, 7 were black, and 5 were white.

Data was collected and tests were administered during one of 4 to 40 one to one sessions with this investigator in the adult jail or in the juvenile detention facility, prior to the trial or to sentencing. The data made available to the court is as follows:

1. Social Class: Education and occupation of parents and of others with whom the subject was living at the time of the crime. The Hollingshead Redlich Two Factor Scale of Social Class was used for categorization, as modified by Palmer in his studies with the children of Harlem (ref: Palmer in As The Twig Is Bent).

2. Home Environment: With whom was the subject living at the time of the crime? What were the disciplinary practices? Had adults or siblings been arrested? Was there a history of alcoholism, drug addiction, or mental illness in the home environment?

3. School Data: Was the subject attending school at the time of the crime? What grade? If not in school, when had the subject dropped out?

4. Previous Delinquencies: Did the subject have a history of arrests? If so how many and for what offenses.?

5. Mental Illness: Has the subject a history of mental illness? Has the subject ever been involved in a rehabilitation program? Have the courts requested examination by an outside psychologist or psychiatrist, and if so what were the conclusions?

6. Substance Abuse: Has the subject ever used alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, heroin, or other illegal drugs? If so, was the use occasional, frequent, or with heavy addiction?

7. Personality Characteristics: The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) was administered and scored by this investigator. Tests are now being scored by National Computer Systems Arion II, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

8. Intelligence Measures: As a function of the age of the subject and the conditions of incarceration, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, the WAIS*R or the WISC*R was administered by this investigator.

RESULTS

1. Social Class: With respect to the education of parents, the families ranged from two subjects where one or both biological parents had completed junior college or a four year college to one AFDC mother (the mother of the 7 and 8 year old) who did not complete the ninth grade. All mothers were working, but one who was deceased, and the AFDC mother. Of the 8 fathers

whose whereabouts were known all were working but one who was disabled. By the most conservative criteria at least two of the 11 families involved were middle class, and an additional two would be classified middle class by the criteria used by Palmer in Harlem.

2. Home Environment: One marriage was intact, one subject whose mother was dead lived with his father, all others parents were divorced. Two females lived with adult males (whom they killed following an abusive altercation), eight lived with the mother, and two lived with other relatives. One sibling is known to have a history of arrest. Eleven subjects reported no knowledge of criminal convictions of parents, one subject's mother was arrested for welfare fraud. Over half the subjects reported that disciplinary procedures included yelling and hitting, the latter twice with objects other than the hand. No record of child abuse existed in the families, although it is probably safe to conclude that violence and chaos existed in some.

3. School Progress: All subjects except the 7 and 8 year olds and one 16 year old, (whose natural father is a college graduate) had dropped out of school between grades 7 and 11. Two males had completed their GED prior to committing their crime, and one female completed her GED while incarcerated prior to sentencing.

4. Previous Delinquencies: Three subjects had multiple histories of arrest all including felonies. One subject had one

arrest for night prowling. One was arrested for aggravated assault at age 11. Seven had no histories of arrest.

5. Mental Illness: No subject had a history of mental illness. Two subjects had been in juvenile rehabilitation programs.

6. Substance Abuse: Four subjects to include the 7 and 8 year old had no history of substance abuse; 7 had used alcohol or marijuana "occasionally", and one was heavily involved with drugs to include heroin and had been in a drug treatment program.

7. Personality Characteristics: Only one of the 8 subjects administered the MMPI evidenced psychopathic or sociopathic tendencies.

8. Intelligence: Data are available for all 12 subjects on standardized measures of intelligence. IQ scores ranged from 75 to 125, with an average of 100. Seven were above 100.

DISCUSSION

When juvenile murderers are tried and convicted in the adult system, judges usually have fewer options with respect to sentencing. Background data may or may not sway sentencing, and usually adult criteria are used. Seven of the ten juveniles mentioned above have been tried or adjudicated in the adult system and have been sentenced; six for life and two for 10 years or more. But correctional institutions vary with respect to their severity and the existence of programs designed to be remedial. In the juvenile system the background information is

of much greater importance, at every stage of adjudication. The institution to which a juvenile adjudicated in the adult system will be sent is a concern for which judges might wish to have greater options, and it is there that background information is most valuable to the court. In general, it can be said that the relevant courts have used these data and have expressed pleasure at having it. The next stage in the development of the model is to ask the judges which information they found most and least useful, and to suggest other data they would like to have.

What can be said about the profiles of the 12 juvenile criminals reported above which is gerneralizable? Only one thing, they were all charged with or convicted of murder. Nine of twelve had dropped out of school and eleven were from divorced parents. Four had previous arrests but eight had not. One was heavily involved with substance abuse and most had occasionally tried alcohol or marijuana. They were not all black, no unusual evidence for violence and chaos in the homes existed, they were not all poor, and over half had IQ's exceeding 100. There was no history of mental illness, less than half had previous arrests, and the MMPI showed ony one that gave indications of psychopathy. The sample size is too small and our knowledge too limited to make generalizations. You see one juvenile murdered and you've seen one. You see 12 and you've seen 12. We are a long way from generalizations. There are caveats in these data however small the sample. The high risk model so useful in nutrition, school attendance, and other areas of social concern doesn't fit these

twelve. Not all were poor, few had homes characterized as violent and chaotic with parental histories of alcoholism, drug addiction and mental disease, their group profile was not one of low intelligence as indicated by the IQ, and most had no previous delinquencies. We would be wise to keep the question about the characteristics of the juvenile murderer open until we have much more data which can be compared across studies.

My husband who is cited, was recently invited to attend the convention for the Blind Veterans Association. He came home stating that the BVA was one organiztion he hoped would never have reason to grow. I have similar feelings about children who kill. I hope there will never be more to study, but there will be.

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